

SMALLPOX VACCINATIONS TO BEGIN FOR LINE TROOPS

by Kevin Larson and Spc. Jacob W. Boyer

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Jan. 17, 2003) -- Forces Command soldiers will start lining up this month for their mandatory smallpox shots, and so will troops in Kuwait, Army officials said.

More than 400 health-care workers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center have already received the vaccination this past month, officials said, without any serious reactions, and only a couple episodes of nausea.

Every member of the 3rd Infantry Division (Mech.) deployed to Kuwait will be administered the smallpox vaccine sometime in the middle of January, said Lt. Col. William Corr, division surgeon.

"It's important for those serving here to get the smallpox vaccination because it can be used as a weapon," he said. "In its aerosolized form, smallpox can be an effective weapon."

The disease is highly contagious and spreads easily from person to person, he said. It could spread through a camp in 24 hours. Because of that, he said it is important that all soldiers in Kuwait receive the vaccine as soon as possible.

"All (servicemembers) who will be in a high-threat area for more than 15 days need to get the smallpox vaccine," Corr said. "We plan to get everybody here vaccinated in one day."

Although some soldiers may have been vaccinated in their childhood or earlier in their military careers, they need to be inoculated again, Corr said. "The effectiveness of the vaccine wanes after five years, and after 20, its effects are negligible," he said.

Unlike the Anthrax vaccine, which requires six shots and an annual booster, Dryvax -- the smallpox vaccine -- only needs to be administered once, Corr said. A two-pronged needle is dipped in the vaccine and punctured one-sixteenth of an inch into the receiver's skin 15 times.

With the threat of smallpox being used as a bio-weapon against military forces, President George W. Bush ordered all Department of Defense military personnel to get the smallpox vaccination.

"Everybody reads the papers, everybody watches CNN," said Col. Phil Stikes, FORSCOM preventive medicine officer. "It's pretty obvious why we need it. We think potential enemies might have it (smallpox)."

A limited number of DoD civilians who have been designated emergency essential will be asked to get a smallpox vaccination also, officials said.

People with compromised immune systems, who have had eczema or atopic dermatitis or other skin conditions that have not yet cleared up and who are pregnant or breastfeeding should not get the smallpox vaccination, Stikes said. Also, if they live with anyone who meets those conditions they should not get vaccinated.

If soldiers meet these medical exclusions and do not get the smallpox vaccination, they are still deployable, Stikes said. If there were a smallpox outbreak medically excluded soldiers would have to roll up their sleeves and take the shot.

"In the event of a smallpox outbreak, their vaccination status would be re-evaluated," Stikes said.

For soldiers who do not meet the exclusion criteria, refusal is not an option. If soldiers refuse the vaccination, the first step will be to educate them on the risks of smallpox, Stikes said. Since this is a force health- protection issue, continued refusal will most likely be considered failure to follow a lawful order.

Side effects for the smallpox vaccine are usually mild, according to Stikes. They include sore arm, fever, headache, body ache and fatigue and peak after eight to 12 days following vaccination.

If soldiers have any concerns or experience any discomfort or side effects beyond those normally expected with the smallpox vaccination, then they should seek medical advice, Stikes said.

"It's better to be safe than sorry," he said.

Soldiers can tell if their vaccination was successful if they see a red, itchy bump form at the vaccination site.

"In the first week, the bump becomes a pus-filled blister," Stikes said. "Then, in the second week, a scab forms. The scab falls off in week three and leaves a small scar."

Although rare, there are some serious side effects possible from the vaccine, Stikes said. Out of one million people, 1,000 will have serious but not life-threatening reactions, 14 to 52 people will have serious skin reactions or brain inflammation, and one or two people may die.

"If it's one in a million for the general population, it will be one in a million for us," he said. "We're a subset of the population."

A thorough and careful screening process, though, will be in place to ensure those at increased risk will not receive the vaccination, Stikes said. The process is still being refined at this time and streamlining it is also in the works.

The vaccine contains a live virus, but it is not smallpox. Instead, the vaccine is made from another pox virus, one closely related to smallpox. But because the vaccine is made from a live, actively growing virus, there are certain key points to remember, Stikes said.

"Key points to remember after being vaccinated are don't touch the spot where the needle was stuck and don't let other people touch it," he said. "If the vaccination spot does get touched, wash your hands right away."

Touching the vaccination site can cause the vaccine to not take or spread the pox used in the vaccine to other areas of the body, according to Stikes. That can cause serious problems, especially near eyes or other moist areas of the body.

The vaccination site will be bandaged following the shot but the bandage can be taken off when the bleeding stops, Stikes said. Disposing the bandage is easy. Just put it in a plastic bag with some bleach and throw it away.

When in close contact with others, though, it is best to keep a bandage over the vaccination site, Stikes said. It's also okay to exercise after being vaccinated, he said, just make sure you bring your own towels for showering. That towel and any other clothes that touch the vaccination site will then have to be washed in hot water with soap and bleach.

And as for the potency of the vaccine to be used, storage duration has had no ill effects, Stikes said. "It's been freeze-dried," he said. "The vaccine has been tested for potency. Smallpox vaccine lasts a really long time."

The last time the vaccine was used to protect against naturally occurring smallpox was 1977 in Somalia. After that outbreak, the wild, naturally-occurring strains of smallpox were eradicated.

Wild or man-made, smallpox disease symptoms are the same. Smallpox symptoms begin with high fever, head and body aches and possibly vomiting, according to Stikes. A bumpy rash follows. The bumps crust, scab, and fall off after a few weeks, leaving scars.

Following exposure to smallpox, the risk of death is high. Thirty percent of infected people die. For some survivors, there is the risk of blindness.

"It's a bad disease," Stikes said. "Don't get it."

Smallpox is commonly spread by face-to-face contact with an infected person, especially one who is coughing. The virus travels in the cough's droplets of moisture.

(Editor's note: Kevin Larson is from FORSCOM News Service. Spc. Jacob W. Boyer is with the 3rd ID in Kuwait. Their reports were combined for this article. In addition, a report from Brett McMillan at Walter Reed also contributed to this article.)